

An Evaluation of the MSc Advanced Practice in Health and Social Care

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Abstract

In February 2006 we commenced delivery of the new interprofessional MSc Advanced Practice in Health and Social Care pathway and we are now seeing our first students graduate from the programme. We therefore undertook a retrospective, summative evaluation of the experience of these graduates on the pathway, specifically to identify ways in which it has impacted on their practice and professional career.

A qualitative approach was used in order to gain rich data about the students' experiences on the pathway. A focus group was conducted and written evaluations invited. The resulting data was analysed using thematic content analysis.



Shirley Jones

Introduction and Context of the Evaluation

The award MSc Advanced Practice in Health and Social Care was designed for all practitioners working within health and social care, either in the public or private sector, or statutory/voluntary services. This encompasses nurses, social workers and allied health professionals who wish to advance their knowledge, skills and professional practice.

The pathway attracts experienced staff from the National Health System (NHS) and social care sector who are usually in senior roles and often in a position to influence the commissioning of education for their staff.

The MSc Advanced Practice in Health and Social Care Pathway had its first intake of students in 2006. This course was developed in response to the demands of the NHS employers who commission contract-funded education for our students and a number of issues arising from difficulties with master's delivery within the Faculty of Health and Social Care.

The new pathway was designed to deliver a part-time master's programme over a period of two years instead of the traditional three years, in order to reduce attrition rates and to accommodate the needs of the purchasers. It also sought to meet the needs of a wider range of students under a single MSc pathway, thereby reducing the need for resource-intensive, small-populated specialist MSc pathways, which comprised our existing MSc portfolio. This was also in line with the government agenda of promoting interprofessional education and collaboration within Health and Social Care.

In 2006 we commenced delivery and delivered the new interprofessional MSc, and we had our first graduates in 2008. It was therefore timely to evaluate their experience of the pathway as a whole and to consider the effect it has had on their development and practice.

Advanced practice is an evolving process and there remains a lack of conceptual agreement concerning the role of the Advanced Practitioner. This is reflected both nationally and locally in the large variation in job titles that imply an advanced level of knowledge, skills and competence. What is certain is that the Advanced Practitioner requires additional knowledge, skills and dispositions over and above clinical/practitioner expertise. These are listed below:

- Leadership
- Interagency working
- Accountability
- Ethical decision making
- Critical reflection
- Knowledge generation
- Research skills

These key skills are seen as important in promoting a readiness to work across organisational boundaries and outside traditional hierarchies, to adopt role innovations and take on demanding new responsibilities such as prescribing.

In response to this agenda the MSc was developed as a generic award and this was reflected in the Curriculum Content which comprised the following modules:

- Collaborative Practice for Integrated care
- Higher Level Practice
- Research Studies
- Dissertation
- Option Module

The Aim

The aim of this project was to evaluate the experience of graduates from the MSc Advanced Practice in Health and Social Care pathway through retrospective, summative evaluation of their experience of the pathway and its fitness for purpose.

Objectives:

- To evaluate the students' experience of the new curriculum model delivery.
- To evaluate the students' perception of the relevance of the pathway content to their professional development and practice.
- To identify examples of the impact of undertaking the MSc Advanced Practice pathway on the students' practice.

Process of Evaluation

The study utilised a qualitative approach to the evaluation of the pathway in order to gain rich data about the students' experiences on the pathway and specifically to identify ways in which it had impacted on their practice.

All 20 graduates from the pathway were contacted by e-mail with an invitation to take part in this evaluation of their experience on the pathway. The invitation came from the Pathway Leader and included an explanation of the purpose of the evaluation. The e-mail invited graduates to a Focus Group to be held at the University and facilitated by an outside researcher unconnected with the pathway.

Focus Group

Seven graduates participated in the focus group out of a total population of eighteen. The group comprised two nurses, three physiotherapists, one dietician and one podiatrist. This group thus yielded a disproportionate representation of the allied health professional groups in respect to the demographic profile of the whole graduate group, which had comprised mainly of nurses (12).

The focus group was conducted by a researcher from outside Anglia Ruskin and the recording was transcribed by an administrator who was not familiar with the students in an attempt to maintain anonymity. The focus group lasted 2½ hours and comprised discussions relating to exploration of student expectations of the pathway, their views on the strengths and weaknesses of the pathway and the impact on their practice.

Results and Discussion

The focus group data was subjected to thematic analysis separately by the two authors and by the outside researcher. The following themes were extracted:

Drivers:

This related to the reasons which had influenced students' decisions to undertake the MSc.

- Validates authority of the practitioner
- Update thinking/learning skills
- Funding available
- Managers' encouragement
- Continuing Professional Development (collecting modules)
- Limited choice of MSc
- Local provision face-to-face delivery

Gains:

The students reported many benefits to their professional development and practice.

- Enhanced their understanding of the wider context of professional practice
- Increase in confidence
- Increase knowledge – depth and breadth
- Improved research skills
- Improved understanding of practice issues at a more strategic level
- Increased reflective/reflexive skills
- Understanding of other practitioners' work/roles, multiple perspectives
- An ability to validate and challenge practice
- Empathy and improved teaching skills with junior staff/students
- Improved dissemination skills
- Peer network and support
- Improved communication and critical awareness skills

Relevance

Some aspects of the course did cause the students to express their concerns, in particular with reference to supporting specialist practitioners often in unique roles. This was discussed in relation to:

- Specialist vs. generic curriculum
- Lack of specialist staff in pathway team.
- Staff credibility to evaluate the links between practice and theory made by students
- Theory/practice modules e.g.: prescribing module

University/Employer Interface

In many ways this theme linked to the issue of relevance and again was identified by students as an area for future development.

- Expectations – different interpretation by University staff, service managers and practitioners of the focus of the pathway

- Rapidly changing context of practice: priorities change, managers change
- Recognition and career development
- Practice-based modules
- Specialism vs. genericism

Conclusion

The results of the evaluation suggest that many aspects of the pathway do support practitioners and have a positive impact on their practice. Students felt that the strength of the course was the focus upon the importance, dynamics and complexities of interprofessional working. One graduate had achieved promotion to a new role linked to achievement of the MSc. However, impact on practice was perceived to be most effective at a strategic and theoretical level, with some practitioners indicating a desire for more advanced level practice-based modules to address 'hands on' practice issues. The links between the practitioners' request for more focused and specialist provision within the MSc pathway and the potential resource implications this raises in terms of potentially small student numbers and the need for highly specialist staff continues to be an area for future development and debate within the Faculty. In addition, there is a need to manage student expectations of the pathway through the development of appropriate marketing material and student advisory interviews to ensure their needs can be met.
